

St. Thomas the Apostle Parish  
Celebrates  
"A Year of Thanksgiving for Fifty Years of Blessings"  
1939

From the beginning, there has been a unique vitality at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, a spirit of generosity and a shared sense of purpose.

According to the Rev. Msgr. Franklyn M. Casale, pastor of St. Thomas and Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Newark, "In the middle of our fifty year history, one of the most significant events of our time took place when Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council to renew the Church with a new "Spirit." If you had to look around to find a parish that typifies that spirit of renewal, you could not find a better community than St. Thomas the Apostle. From its beginning, St. Thomas has been a parish open to the movement of God."

St. Thomas the Apostle was founded on January 26, 1939, by the late Archbishop of Newark, Thomas J. Walsh, who once said he had named the new parish after his own patron saint.

On June 17, 1939, Archbishop Walsh appointed the Rev. Thomas J. Herron as pastor of St. Thomas and on Sunday, June 25, Father Herron celebrated the first Mass in a 60' by 100' tent.

"The idea may seem novel," wrote the Bloomfield Catholic newspaper in July 1939, but it really has an ancient precedent. In the Old Testament, we find the Jews had their Holy of Holies in a portable tent before the temple was built in Jerusalem." As so it was that the tent became a House of Worship for the 300 original families of the parish, known as "tenters."

The tent was used as a temporary church until October 15, when the cornerstone was laid for the new church school building. By the time the combination building was dedicated by Archbishop Walsh on March 31, 1940, work was well underway on the two other original buildings of the complex, the rectory and the convent.

Throughout the years 1939 and 1940, various parish activities were organized, including the Rosary and Holy Name Societies, and a Women's Guild which ran social events to help with parish expenses. The first benefit, a cake sale, was held in July 1939, followed later that month by a family picnic. The annual parish picnic is a tradition which continues to this day.

Activities were also organized for the young people of the parish, including athletic teams, scouts and a CYO. Often, Father Herron would accompany the youngsters to athletic events to cheer them on.

In June 1940, a newly ordained priest, the Rev. Joseph M. Doyle was assigned to St. Thomas as the first resident curate.

Early in 1946, Father Herron died of a heart attack and the pastorate was vacant for thirteen months until the Rev. James F. Flanagan, a close friend of Father Herron, was appointed as his successor.

In 1950, Father Flanagan received permission to add eight classrooms to the school by building a third floor. This was the first of several major expansions in the rapidly growing parish.

Father Flanagan died in January 1953, and was succeeded that June by the Rev. Michael A. Magnier. Father Magnier recognized the need for a new church and immediately began a campaign to reduce the parish debt. A one day fundraising drive by some 400 parishioners obtained pledges of \$450,000. In September 1956, Father Magnier broke ground for the new church. The first Mass was offered on February 21, 1960.

In January 1963, Father Magnier was elevated to the rank of Monsignor by Pope John XXIII, a cause for celebration in the parish.

It was during the years following the Second Vatican Council that the lay people of the parish, both men and women, became increasingly involved in ministry, first as commentators and lectors, later as Eucharistic Ministers and leaders of song.

In August 1968, Msgr. Magnier retired and the Rev. Msgr. Vincent P. Coburn was selected to be the fourth pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle Parish.

One of Msgr. Coburn's priorities was the renovation and modernization of the school's facilities. Over the years, the school population had grown to 750 students, with another 1,500 attending Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes. In 1969, a new library, cafeteria and several meetings rooms were built to accommodate their needs.

A Parish Council was formed in 1970, and various subcommittees, such as Liturgy, Finance and Home and School began functioning as advisory groups.

That same year, Msgr. Coburn saw the need for a senior citizens group and established the September Club.

In June 1974, Jose Barrios became the first man from the Newark Archdiocese to be ordained to the Permanent Diaconate. He was assigned to St. Thomas, and followed over the years by Deacons Albert Tizzano, John Walsh, Roland Scarlatelli, Walter Kelly, Henry Stark, Thomas Noone and William Morris. Deacons Tizzano, Walsh and Morris continue to serve the people of St. Thomas.

Also serving the parish in prayer and action are the Small Christian Communities which grew out of the RENEW program of the late 1970's. Eight Communities, with a total of more than 100 members, now gather regularly for Scripture and meditation, and are also involved in social issues and works of charity.

In 1983, The RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, was organized to carry on the Church's work of evangelization. The RCIA is a year-long program of instruction in the faith for non-Catholics interested in joining the Church and for Catholics who have left for whatever reason and now are interested in coming home.

"I see the RCIA permeating the parish more and more," says Msgr. Casale, "and calling us all to a constant renewal of our baptismal commitment to holiness in Jesus as we strive to be active, committed Christians."

According to Msgr. Casale, "We will continue to have our other strong programs, like our Parochial School and the Religious Education programs and Small Christian Community groups." Right now, the Religious Education program provides instruction for children preparing to receive the sacraments of First Eucharist, First Penance and Confirmation, and CCD classes for more than 650 public school children in the first through eight grades.

For adults interested in preparing for ministry, St. Thomas hosts an archdiocesan enrichment program called Christian Foundations for Ministry, which offers seminars throughout the year.

In 1984, the Sisters of Charity celebrated a major milestone, the 125th anniversary of the founding of their order. Today, their ministry includes both education and outreach to the community-at-large.

"We have a responsibility to participate in the life of the Church and in society," says Sister Patricia Michael, Pastoral Associate in Parish Ministry, "and to minister to anyone who is in need spiritually, physically or psychologically."

Today, under the auspices of the Parish Life Committee, St. Thomas offers support and counseling through its ministries to the sick, the shut-in, the elderly, the disabled, the bereaved, and the separated and divorced.

St. Thomas also reaches beyond its borders through participation in the Parish Partnership Program.

"I see our parish as one of the flagships of the Archdiocese," says Msgr. Casale, "providing a model and sharing our resources. We've certainly demonstrated generosity through the years to people in need by the way we assist in other places, such as St. Rocco's in Newark, Covenant House in New York and Mother Theresa's convents in Newark and Plainfield. For many years, St. Thomas has also led the Archbishop's Annual Appeal."

Last December, St. Thomas opened its doors to the homeless of Essex County, working in conjunction with the Interfaith Hospitality Network. For seven days over the Christmas holidays, St. Thomas provided temporary shelter for three homeless families, while they continued their search for permanent homes.

During the past year, several groups have been started to increase the participation of men in parish life, including a Men's Bible Study, a reactivated Holy Name Society and a Men's Christian Support Group.

As increasingly active Music Ministry under the direction of Dr. Richard A. Barrows, now includes several outstanding choirs, and sponsors a number of concerts throughout the year, in addition to its participation in liturgical celebrations.

A revitalized Youth Group serves the young people of the parish, offering a combination of spiritual, social and athletic activities for high school age students.

For very young children, a pre-school program for three and four year olds was organized in 1988.

A major goal over the next few years will be the reorganization of the Pastoral Council. According to the Council President Mary Pat Bogart, "All those who serve the parish in like minded ministries will be grouped together in clusters, through which they will have an opportunity to give and receive resources, support knowledge and inspiration for the collective vision and the common good."

"In the future," says Msgr. Casale, "I think there will continue to be large groups of people from within the parish who will be raised up as leaders in the parish. I see us continuing to have large numbers of men and women who will follow Christ through religious vocations. I also think our people will come to a more personal relationship with Christ as they begin to realize that you can't go it alone, that our primary relationship must be with the Lord."

For 50 years, says Msgr. Casale, "The spirit of our original founding members has been renewed over and over again through the power of the Holy Spirit."

And so we begin our second fifty years, thankful for God's blessings and committed to His service.